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**Final submission to special edition of *British Journal of Management*:  
Making the business school more “critical”.**

**Title: Who is it that would make Business Schools more Critical?  
Critical Reflections on Critical Management Studies**

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# **Who is it that would make Business Schools more Critical?**

## **Critical Reflections on Critical Management Studies**

### **Abstract**

We suggest in this paper that whilst exploring how to make business schools more critical we must also turn a critical and reflexive lens upon ourselves, critical management thinkers. Our endeavour is outlined here as a ‘reflexive journey’ in which we turn upon ourselves, academics who identify as ‘critical’ thinkers, the theories we use to analyse others. Our focus is upon critical management education (CME). We use three vignettes drawn from our previous research. One is of graduands from the postgraduate programmes on which two of us teach; the second an analysis of knowledge transfer programmes in which we have participated; and the third is a study of the construction of academic identities. The first study shows the academic teacher may become an internalised, judgemental gaze; the second that what we see as a critical approach may be construed by our students as another ‘truth’ that fails to encompass the complexities of organisations and management, and the third encourages us to ask some questions about our own positions. This causes us to ask some uncomfortable questions about our own positions as critical management scholars and the ways in which we conceptualise business schools and our colleagues who work in them.

**Key words:** academic selves; business school research and teaching; critical management studies; reflexivity; self criticism

## Introduction

This special edition of *the British Journal of Management* speaks to a long-running and increasingly important debate about the problematic nature of much teaching and research in business schools. Many business schools are seen to have failed because they are less and less relevant to managers and organisations (Ghoshal, 2005; Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer and Fong, 2004). The charge is that they undertake research which leads to recommendations that have never had proven successful outcomes, and they teach topics that are so abstract they cannot be applied within managers' jobs. If that is the case, then business schools have done 'our' work (as critics of business schools) for us – they have destroyed themselves. But that would be a short-sighted conclusion, for it ignores the presumption that business schools should be teaching topics that are directly applicable to managers' jobs. That instrumental view of education is anathema to many of us working in higher education – in business schools as much as in other departments.

There is another charge against business schools that is more apposite for the poststructural perspective which informs this paper. This is that business schools are so atheoretical they fail to educate (French and Grey, 1996), and so the business school curriculum should be based on a broader, liberal education akin in many ways to that taught in the arts, humanities and social sciences (Anthony, 1986). Such a curriculum would focus on 'social and structural issues of power, control, and inequality' (Grey, 2004, p. 182). Numerous papers in journals such as *Management Learning* (for example, Elliot and Reynolds, 2002), *Journal of Management Education* (for example, Cunliffe, 2002; Grey, 2002; Reynolds, 1999), other journals (for example Grey and Antonacopolou, 2004; Cunliffe, 2002; Forray and Mir, 1994)

and in edited books (for example, Reynolds, 1997) testify to attempts to teach this more critical curriculum and/or incorporate critical thinking into knowledge transfer programmes. Textbooks and books of edited readings have been published whose aim is to assist students develop understanding of power, control and inequality (Alvesson and Willmott, 2003; Grey, 2005; Grey and Willmott, 2005; Knights and Willmott, 1999; Knights and Willmott, 2007).

We have participated in this attempt to make management education and research more critical, in the sense of designing a curriculum that encourages students to explore power, control and inequalities. We have designed and delivered a masters degree and professional doctorate programme for public sector managers which introduced all students to critical management theories. Students have responded more and less enthusiastically to the critical pathways through the programmes, some reporting a sense of achievement at being able to work with, say, Foucauldian or poststructuralist feminist ideas, others reporting that they have more confidence as middle level managers and will not accept bullying, misogyny or demeaning attitudes from those in more powerful positions. This is all anecdotal evidence, of course, but it chimes with our own experiences. All three authors of this paper are mature entrants to academic careers. One of us was a director of personnel who was becoming increasingly involved as a guest lecturer on academic programmes at a time when she was becoming discomfited by the practice of management (Ford). She took up a full-time academic post, and subsequently found in critical management the language that allowed her to articulate the feelings of unease she'd experienced when working as a manager. The second had been a mature student, a miner's wife, determined on gaining a degree in management in order to escape the tedium,

discrimination and denigration she had experienced while working on factory production lines and as a typist (Harding). She was introduced to Marxism towards the end of her first term as an under-graduate, and in the course of one seminar her world turned upside down. The third author had, after starting on what was forecast to be an assured career path towards a senior management position, become disillusioned by the ways in which things were done in organisations, and again found in critical management studies a way of articulating, and therefore challenging, the practices that had caused the disillusionment (Learmonth).

We thus write as individuals with long experience of working in organisations, who all completed doctorates as mature students, and who all now work in business schools or schools of management. We say this in order to situate ourselves as the writers of this paper, in an era in which the reflexive turn requires that readers know something about the authors – and indeed because one reviewer of the first draft of the paper required us to say something more about ourselves. But we are also aware that in making these statements they might be read to be staking a claim to authenticity arising from having ‘been there’ (Probyn, 1993). Our intention is rather more complex than that and is articulated succinctly in Probyn’s words:

‘As an enunciative position [...] the self can be used to produce a radical rearticulation of the relationship of critic, experience, text and the conjunctural moments that we construct as we speak of that which we live’ (Probyn, 1993, p. 31).

So, we have established who we are: people whose lives have been changed as a result of being introduced to ways of thinking critically about organisations and the people who work in them, and who are now enthusiastic and committed researchers in

and teachers of critical management. What we are doing in this paper is to cast our own theoretical lenses back upon ourselves, as we feel that if we are to make business schools more critical it behoves us firstly to understand the ‘I’ who would make them more critical. We need to ensure that our stance is as ethical as possible, and to do that requires that we ‘give an account of ourselves’ (Butler, 2005).

We do not wish to make the sort of charge against critical management to be found in such work as Clegg *et al.* (2006) which erects a seemingly pristine thing called ‘critical management’ for the purpose of tearing it to pieces, not noticing along the way that the pristine thing bears little semblance to how others understand ‘critical management’. Indeed, we are not making any charge against CMS, but rather are seeking understanding. Our aim, we emphasise, in turning a reflexive eye back upon those of us who identify ourselves within this amorphous, indefinable rubric, ‘critical management studies’ is to ensure that we are behaving ethically<sup>i</sup>. Before we can explore how to make business schools more critical, we need to explore our motives and to ask what it is about our own practices that, we seem to believe, make them superior to those of our mainstream colleagues.

The influences that led to our approach in this paper are, firstly, Probyn’s (1993) critique of anthropology’s attempt to adopt an ethical, reflexive approach. She argues that anthropology’s turn towards reflexivity had resulted in little except a more subtle method by which anthropologists used the Other in constructing the (superior) self, and echoed Kant in asking ‘who is the I who reflects upon the [reflexive] I?’ She is emphatic that rather than just exploring the ‘I’ who is exploring this other ‘I’, we must try to grasp ‘what exactly a self-reflexive self is reflecting upon’ (Probyn, 1993, p.

62). Who is it that is speaking, how is the speaker constructing the Other, and what faulty conception of the self may be at work within this reflexivity? She recommends that the writer's self should acknowledge 'the conditions of its possibility, of its very existence' (p.80). Thus the academic writer is a subject position that should be 'firmly based in an epistemological questioning of how it is that I am speaking' (p. 81). This awareness 'decentralizes any assurance of ontological importance', for it 'skewers the inflation of the academic ego' (p. 81) leading us to ask, who is the 'I' who believes that business schools should be more critical?

However, our second influence is Butler's exploration (2005) of ethics and her discussion of the impossibility of being able to fully account for the self who is called upon to act ethically. It is impossible to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, for it is impossible ever to fully know the 'I'. All we can do is make the attempt to know this 'I' who is called upon to act ethically. Probyn thus causes us to reflect upon the self, and Butler to put that reflection in an ethical context that recognises, at the same time, the impossibility of ever fully accounting for the self.

In an earlier version of this paper we had argued that the 'I' who is recommending that business schools be made more critical must inevitably have an other by which it knows itself (Wray-Bliss, 2002), and we suggested that it is mainstream colleagues working in business schools who are the other of critical management thinkers. If so, then those of us who call ourselves (however loosely and with qualifications) critical management thinkers are provided by mainstream business school colleagues with a 'palimpsest through which we see ourselves' (Probyn, 1993, p. 81). We asked, in that



earlier draft, if those colleagues perhaps see us as their other, and concluded that it is quite likely that they do.

The responses of reviewers led us to put that discussion to one side, although not to erase it. We wish to keep it active, a possible way of thinking through the relation of CMS to business schools, but as we rewrote this paper we concluded that in making such a bald statement we let ourselves off the hook of some more unpalatable insights into our critical managerial selves that need to be explored. We have included reference to it here therefore, because it anticipates something of the tone of the exploration to come: a self-questioning that can be discomfiting but which, we hope, offers the opportunity for fruitful debate and discussion.

### **Turning our epistemological perspective back upon ourselves**

Over the years, we have pondered how to make our teaching both more critical and better able to bring about changes in the practices of the managers and aspirant managers we teach. At various points we have cast a reflexive eye back on our own endeavours to make management education more critical and have refined our approach accordingly. The first of such attempts was a study of how managers constructed and reconstructed their identities during an organisational merger, and as part of that study we interviewed some graduates of the programmes we teach (Ford and Harding, 2003; Ford and Harding, 2004). The second was an analysis of knowledge transfer activity in which we have been involved, in which we undertook a reflexive ethnographic approach to our own activities (Ford and Harding, 2007). This was augmented by a later study of managers in an organisation that had recently been

involved in an intensive leadership development programme (Ford, 2006; Ford and Harding, 2008; Ford, Harding and Learmonth, 2008). The third is a study of the construction of academic identities. We summarise those endeavours here, in the form of three vignettes, which lead to the posing of questions about our critical management selves.

The vignettes capture moments in our continuing journeys based on our work experiences. The original studies were informed by poststructuralist theory, notably the works of Derrida, Foucault, queer theory and poststructuralist feminism. Our research and reading is currently taking us into explorations of theorists whose work is influenced by Freudian interpretations of Hegel's master/slave dialectic, such as Lacan (1977); Benjamin (1988; 1995; 1998), Butler (1997; 2004; 2005), and others. Their work informs the background to the discussions in this paper, but we are aiming for a style which deliberately plays down the exploration of formal theory so as to open discussion about who we are, as self-styled critical management theorists, and why it is that we seek to make business schools more critical. We do not wish to detract from the self-examination that could come from exploring the validity of our research methods, the suitability of the chosen theory, or the peculiarities of our readings. This is not to evade such discussions, as the papers from which these vignettes are drawn are in the public realm and relevant discussions are to be found there.

Our stories lead us to a critique of our previous stance of casting mainstream business school staff as our Other. We have treated them as objects to our subjects, opening ourselves to the accusation of doing that very thing which we accuse managers of doing to employees.

## **Vignette One: Graduands**

Five middle and senior managers, all graduates from a masters programme in management and leadership, were interviewed by us when studying the merger of two hospitals (a fuller discussion, including details of the methodology used, can be found in Harding, 2003, Chapter Seven; see also Ford and Harding, 2003; 2005). They had been introduced to elements of critical reflexivity during their studies, although they had not studied critical management ideas in any depth. The analysis shows they thought they had not changed the ways in which they undertook their managerial tasks as a result of their studies; rather, their course of study had led them to develop a new concept of the self, that of the textbook manager, a normative identity which they monitor constantly to ensure they are achieving its norms. (The interviewees comprised both men and women – we refer to them all as ‘she’.)

We begin our analysis with the reply of one who, when asked what studying for a masters degree had meant, replied:

‘I think the course has made me recognise you know it’s it’s sort of filled in the knowledge gaps as it were because you can go through life doing things and you have no idea why or what the theory is behind it. So I suppose because I’m much better read now I can recognise you know just what I’m about and how my mind’s working and what I’m doing. So that’s what the course has done for me.’

This speaker feels she has been provided with a theory of her pre-existing management practices. In referring to herself as 'you' in the statement 'you can go through life doing things and you have no idea why or what the theory is behind it' she refers to a past, pre-study self, someone she now regards as uneducated and lacking individuality. Her studies, she suggests, have lifted her out of the commonality through giving her something that is unique to her. This unique person claims she has understanding – 'I can recognise you know just what I'm about and how my mind's working and what I'm doing' - whereas she regards herself as having previously walked around as if she were an automaton, performing actions without knowing the reasons why. This is a self that claims deep self-understanding about her actions in her managerial world.

The graduate manager, as exemplified by the next speaker, looks at itself as if she were an object seen through the eyes of several subjects. She judges the object that is the self she looks at: -

'I had felt I had got to a stage at Medicine at [Trust B] where I was on top of my job, knew all the consultants, got on well with them, and had respect within the Trust. Umm. I had been doing my masters degree and my dissertation was on job satisfaction in middle managers in an NHS Trust, and I had actually done that with Elizabeth Jones [new chief executive] as my sponsor. So I actually felt I had just hit a sort of pinnacle really where I'd I'd got some sort of I suppose recognition and acknowledgement in the Trust that I was doing a good job. I was efficient and I was on lots of Trust working groups. I was invited on a lot of Trust working groups. Partly through what I'd done, partly also I think because I had been doing the masters course and

people actually think ‘God, she’s actually doing some academic study’ and it’s that feeling of self-esteem, of value and recognition achievement that we all want’

The actual doing of the course of study, rather than the content, is what is valued. In looking at herself as an object in the eyes of subjects around her she makes the self visible to the self in order to assess it.

It is only in private that the managerial self can be put aside. Interestingly, it is with fellow students that the rational, non-emotional, super-human façade is allowed to slip. The speaker is experiencing many problems in her current job.

‘Interestingly enough people I’ve been on the [masters degree] with who worked at [Trust A] when I was at [Trust B] I’m now sort of working amongst them and there’s a more of a support mechanism there. People like Jane Stevens who was in the same cohort as me is now a divisional nurse in another area but we both came through this cohort together so knew each other from the [university], and you know you can just drop in and have coffee and say how is it for you and you both sit there looking bedraggled and tired and you have a real, so you can have a mega chelp (*sic*) to each other and just get it off your chest.

Here, out of sight of any others save for fellow graduates, it is safe to reveal the private self, the ‘you’, the manager who looks ‘bedraggled and tired’ and who is not maintaining the managerial norm. This private manager complains and pours out

troubles but only in the safety of an office tucked away and out of the sight of others. The judgemental gaze does not operate here.

A higher degree in management thus provides a means of checking on the managerial self to ensure she is conforming to how a manager should appear to be, i.e. one who reflexively obeys the rules encoded in management education. Our next speaker confirms this. Without prompting, she referred on several occasions to the co-ordinator of the degree programme, who we have here called Amy. Having referred several times to Amy, she said

‘I don’t sleep very well. I tend to wake up around 4 o’clock most days. But much of that is about, I’ve got so much work to do and the anxiety levels. And I do work very late. However, again, to be very, very fair, [pause], and I’ll blame this on Amy W, umm, I did my MA with Amy, Amy led the MA that I did and finished in whenever it was, and I did my MA in the middle of the night. So, umm, I’m quite used to working late at night. Umm That’s not a problem for me.’

These repeated references to the director of the management degree, Amy, are located within references to judgement and assessment, with the inference that Amy is symbolic of someone who is constantly checking on what the respondent is doing.

Thus, the respondent shows that she is failing to achieve her managerial objectives and she does not wish the course director to know about this. In admitting that her work is now so demanding it prevents her sleeping, she acknowledges her failure to

live up to the norms of the manager. The repeated references to the course director/managerial discourse signal that she is examining herself through the internalised gaze of the managerial discourse that became part of her self as she undertook her postgraduate studies. This brings her up short and she changes the tenor of her talk, showing that she wishes to be seen not as a failing manager but as super-human, able to work late at night. This repositioning of herself shows further how the course director personifies the judgemental gaze.

The value of this small study lies in its requiring us to pause for thought; it suggests that at least some of those who have studied management over a prolonged course of study do not become the rational, logical, non-emotional managers of organisation theory, but they seek to *present themselves* as if they are, and check themselves to ensure they keep up the appearance. They present public selves that appear to conform to the all-controlling manager, and constantly monitor themselves to prevent deviation from the role in public. Any aberration occurs in private or must be denied. They have absorbed ‘the managerial gaze’, reified in the bodies of management teachers. Nowhere in our interviews did respondents report that their studies had changed the way they worked as managers. Throughout the emphasis was upon the self and how this had changed.

We were concerned at this conclusion. Regardless of our attempts some years earlier to encourage them to think differently, these managers had incorporated both ‘critical’ and ‘mainstream’ theories in a managerial self that is constantly monitoring and judging itself. Now, we are not claiming that these managers are typical of all graduates of masters programmes in management and/or leadership. Indeed, our own

experiences as students suggest otherwise. What we are suggesting is that postgraduate study in business schools or other departments which teach management may provide norms of management that some students internalise and use as a means for assessing the self. There is a possibility that whatever we teach (including critical management thinking) can become, for some, a form of surveillance and internalised control of the managerial self that may do little to change the use of power or perpetuation of inequalities.

This vignette encapsulates our confusion as to the impact we may have on some of our students. Our response was to devote more time in our teaching to theories of control and resistance, and we encourage our students to explore the ways in which they, as managers and professional workers, are the subjects of power. We also encourage them to explore the ways we, as academics, position them and impose power upon them. However, it made us acutely aware that when discussing how to make business schools more critical we need better understanding of the effects of our own work on others. For some students, the effect of our teaching may be little different from that of colleagues whose focus is more upon improving efficiency and profitability. In other words, we need to be more critical and analytical about our selves, the positions we adopt as critical thinkers, and the ways in which what we teach affects constructions of the selves of those we teach. We cannot presume any superiority over 'the business school', but there is a danger that our critical stance presumes that very thing. This is a stance that should neither weaken our politics nor change our aim of somehow subverting the performative intent of organizations. However, we do need to look at ourselves through the eyes of people who, in looking at us, see people very different from how we see ourselves (Taussig, 1993).



## **Vignette Two: Reflecting upon the Critical ‘I’**

Alerted by the above narrative to the need to be more reflexive about our own practices, in 2006 we carried out an autoethnographic study of our participation, as trainers, in leadership development programmes. (A fuller discussion, including a justification of the methodology, can be found in Ford and Harding, 2007). Such programmes are increasingly important parts of business schools’ activities and provide an opportunity to engage with managers directly. Leadership training courses are a very useful opportunity for such engagement for they are increasingly popular: 78% of UK organisations rate leadership development as a top or important priority and 82% of organizations use leadership training programmes (Alimo-Metcalfe *et al.*, 2000). Little evaluated, (Edmonstone and Western 2002; Blackler and Kennedy 2004; Burgoyne *et al.*, 2004), these courses tend to be short in duration, and to consist of: sessions which define leadership and discuss what research has established about the topic; completion of psychometric tests that claim to measure a person’s leadership style; individual feedback and discussion of the results of those tests, various group-work exercises, project work and, in the longer courses, action-learning sets that meet regularly over a course of months.

In our own participation we typically arrive early at the venue, dressed in smart suits that hide how we feel about the day to come. At the beginning of a programme the dominant feeling may be a nervousness stimulated by the need to appear utterly professional and knowledgeable, and insecurities arising from what can seem

sometimes as the sheer impossibility of being as skilful and wise as is required. Over the course of a few days the nervousness can be replaced by boredom as we anticipate another day of ‘more of the same’.

When giving one-to-one feedback on the results of the psychometric tools ubiquitous in these programmes, we use the knowledge garnered from a critique of such tools to persuade participants to think critically about the potential of such measures to influence the psyche. We discuss how the tools have an intuitive appeal that is in many ways similar to horoscopes, although their claims to scientific integrity give them more powers of influence over constructions of the self (Case and Phillipson, 2004). We take the opportunity to discuss power and control, how managers (or leaders) are subjects of power, and how they may be used as instruments for the control of their staff. We do this through focusing upon how they see themselves and how they are seen by others (as shown in information gathered by 360-degree assessment), the ways in which they may make the working lives of staff and colleagues more or less bearable, and the ways in which they facilitate manipulation and exploitation of staff (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Currie, 1999; Ford and Harding, 2007; Knights and Willmott, 1992).

When we turned a reflexive lens back upon our own participation we focussed on the subjectivity of the subject position of ‘trainer’. This suggested the limitations on ‘being critical’. Our analysis ranged from the sorts of clothes we wore when delivering training, to the aspects of the programme in which we felt comfortable and in control, and to the facets which made us feel uncomfortable. We recounted those times when we felt we were failing in our attempt to span the boundaries between

critical and uncritical; when we moved between academic and non-academic subject positions; and when we slipped from a claimed expertise into a fear of failure.

We found that in the flux of discussion we moved fluidly and easily in and out of critical and non-critical subject positions. More importantly perhaps for present purposes we had to question how our own power had an influence we had not anticipated – we are ‘academics’ and therefore people accord us the expertise of the scientist. What is critical to us may therefore appear *uncritical* to others who may take it as ‘truth’. This led us to a concern that we were doing no more than perhaps replacing one ‘truth’ with another.

Further, one of the authors carried out a study of an organisation shortly after its management team had participated in an intensive leadership development course (see Ford, (2006) and Ford (forthcoming) for further elucidation). The managers were experiencing much anxiety, although whether the leadership course was correlation or causation is unclear. However, the responses to the leadership programme showed the complexities of the flux of organisational life and the reception to new ideas. Managers espoused a desire to be or to practise ‘post-heroic leadership’, but proved traitorous to their desires when it came to practising leadership for, they said, the pressures of work prevented them doing anything more than ‘management’. At each level of the hierarchy interviewees reported themselves, however, as good leaders, but leaders let down by the managers in the tier above them, who were, they said, universally poor. The tier above reported itself as comprising of good leaders, but unfortunately, they said, the tier above them was very poor indeed. And so on, this was repeated throughout the hierarchy.

So, our experiences of leadership training programmes have led us to question not only the possibility that we may, in using critical management perspectives, be attempting to replace one truth with another, but also to bemusement as to the utter complexities of organisational life when compared to the simplicities of the models<sup>ii</sup> of organisations with which we work. At this stage, we had become convinced that the ways in which our teaching influences the working lives of people in organisations is through means that are convoluted, meandering, unpredictable and perhaps individualised. This leads us to two questions: could not the same be true of the teaching in business schools more generally? Are not business schools just as complex as other organisations?

We will come back to those questions. The effect these observations have had on our own teaching has been that Author One has developed a dialogical form of leadership training, with the aim of encouraging managers to reflect further upon themselves and their practices, the power they have over others and the powers to which they are subjected, and what they can do to take more care over power in organisations (Ford, Harding and Learmonth, 2008, chapter 8). The rationale for this approach is similar to that which informed consciousness-raising in the second wave of feminism. Author Two was keen to devote more time to writing and so gave up involvement in training courses.

### **Vignette 3: Constructing the Academic Self**

Our third vignette is of how we came to question our own motives. In 2006 we were experimenting with a method of interviewing that removed some of the reliance on memory that is intrinsic to the research interview. We asked interviewees to keep an account of a day in their lives, and then used that account as an aide memoir in the interview. We piloted this method in a small study of the constructions of academic selves, interviewing five academics (Ford and Harding, 2008).

The analysis of the data from that pilot study led us to conclude that academics have an ideal and idealised Other to which they aspire. This, the highly successful academic ‘star’, the much published, wise, revered intellectual, appears to be that which is desired (in the Lacanian sense – see Jones and Spicer, 2005) by academics, or at least those involved in our small study. There is a more oppressive other that they seek to avoid being territorialized by: the administrator who may be thoroughly efficient but cannot generate ideas. The speakers moved swiftly between subject positions, their voices (including our own, as this was partly auto-ethnographic) lifting with ebullient joyfulness as they talked about research and falling into depressed cadences as they talked about administrative responsibilities. The academic as hero informed the intellectual self: a hero bringing knowledge and wisdom to the current and future generations of managers.

Looking at ourselves in the mirror we then held up to ourselves was uncomfortable (Reedy, 2008). No matter how noble we felt (and feel) our aspirations to be, there was and always is an element of self-interest, of career enhancement, of feeling heroic, of seeing one’s self as somehow the superior to less wise subjects. We had to admit to our fallibility as human beings. It also means, of course, that we have to

admit to the humanity of those we may otherwise characterise as different from, less than, not as well informed, not as honest, not as high-minded as us: colleagues working in the very business schools that employ us.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

It has been the explorations of our own teaching and our own subjectivities, then, as we have represented them in the above vignettes that have led us to ask unsettling questions, not only about CMS, but also about CMS's relationship with the wider business school – and our place(s) within both. For example, the issues within the vignettes have led us to question the unpredictable ways in which our teaching is taken up by our students, the danger of our replacing one 'truth' with another, the complexities of the organizations into which these 'truths' are inserted, and the aspects of our selves that are less attractive than we like to admit (ambitious, self-interested, status-seeking and protective of our own egos).

From vignette one we are led to ask: if, when they go back to the workplace, students take with them a self that is influenced by our teaching in ways we can neither predict nor anticipate, then must not similar things happen to students who have been exposed only to mainstream business school education (Reedy, 2003)? If so, then we cannot decry mainstream teaching in the ways we sometimes like to do. This is because the impact on students of both CMS and mainstream thinking may be wondrous – or appalling – regardless of the intentions of whoever happens to have taught them (Weber, 1985). Students are not empty vessels, waiting to be filled by our knowledge, but complex subjects whose on-going processes of becoming work with

the ideas they are taught in ways that are (perhaps thankfully) unpredictable. We make a presumption, as critical management thinkers, that we can influence them, and indeed, it is the argument we often use to justify what we do in critical management education (Learmonth, 2007). However, the road between cause and effect is often long, winding and full of highways, bye-ways, deviations, traffic jams, diversions and potholes.

From vignette two we are led to ask, firstly: if organisations are always in flux, always in the process of becoming (Burrell, 1988a; 1988b; Chia, 1994; Cooper and Burrell, 1988; Cooper and Burrell, 1989; Ford, 2007; Ford and Harding, 2004; Knights, 1997) so that the introduction of ideas from educational or training programmes is unpredictable, complex, irrational and undirected, then cannot business schools also be in as complex a flux of becoming-ness (Chia, 1995)? If we accept this argument, it becomes more difficult to know what exactly these things called ‘business schools’ – institutions that we aim to make more critical – are. What do we know about them beyond our own beliefs that much of what is taught is to be lamented as a form of dis-education? We reiterate our relief that it is perhaps fortunate that we can never control for the effects that our teaching will have as ideas are taught in ways that are unpredictable. The structural power of business schools may ensure that mainstream perspectives remain dominant; on the other hand, however, the simple fact that many business schools employ CMS thinkers might, *in itself*, suggest more complexity in the identity of business schools than received critical ideas might imply.

Indeed, vignette three leads us to ask whether our colleagues in business schools may not feel as committed to education, to improving the lot of their students and the rest of society, as we do. We may choose to see some of them as less committed and less intellectual – but is that really the case? Could we perhaps be projecting some of the disavowed aspects of ourselves on to them? Indeed, in our certainty of the rightness of our strongly-held intellectual ideas, is there not a danger that we are attempting to impose our ‘truth’ on subjects in place of what other ‘truths’ are available. The success of this imposition is inevitably limited and dependent on it not being too far from their existing sense of the ‘truth’ and other broad ranging conceptions

We started our careers as critical management thinkers convinced of the need to introduce students to critical management ideas, and to give them a language in which to articulate the unrest many of them felt about their managerial or professional roles. This had been our own experience of the impact of much CMS thinking on our own lives, an experience we continue to value highly. However, our reflexive analyses have led us to see problems with that early position, especially given the institutional positions in which we now find ourselves. So, in this paper we have posed questions that, we suggest, need to be explored prior to discussions of how to make business schools more critical.

The major questions we suggest should be asked are: who is this ‘I’ who would make business schools more critical? Who are the objects that allow us – as CMS scholars – *our* subjectivity? What, indeed, is a business school? At this stage, we are not sure of the answers to such questions – indeed we believe there can be no categorical answers. But our purpose in asking them is to start a more far-reaching and more



reflexively aware debate about what we may mean by ‘making the business school more critical’. In this we may be accused of being narcissistic – indeed one reviewer refers to our arguments as ‘moral narcissism’. This is, of course, one reading of our arguments. We could answer that a lack of reflexivity accompanying an unexplored certainty about the correctness of our critical practices, our certainty that our stance is the only correct one, is also ‘moral narcissism’. It is important to recognise that self-criticism is not a distancing from critical practice, but one means of honing those critical practices so that they achieve something in the world. There are other means, and many will find such an approach unpalatable. We offer one view of ‘making business schools more critical’ through analysing our own practices. This is just one contribution to the multi-faceted debate that, we hope, leads to changes in working lives.

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<sup>i</sup> We recognise the diversity of ethical perspectives and in this context we are seeking to challenge and question our motives through seeking to adopt ethical approaches that encourage us to expose stereotypical behaviours and the underlying assumptions in our work. Our perspective has been influenced by various critical writers on ethics, including Judith Butler's 2005 writings on ethics of the self and within organisation studies through Martin Parker's (1998) edited collection.

<sup>ii</sup> Reviewers have alerted us that it is the very nature of models to simplify that which is difficult to articulate, but our concern is that it is within the very complexity and ambiguity that more insightful conceptualising can emerge.